

Soldiers *Online*



White (*center*) sees wisdom in Army Chief of Staff GEN Eric K. Shinseki's (*right*) plans to transform the Army to a lighter, more strategic force.



Introducing Army Secretary Thomas E. White

Story by Beth Reece Photos by SSG Jack Siemieniec

LIKE soldiers do, and always with pleasure, Thomas E. White Jr. swaps stories. He tells of 1966, West Point. The football team is coming off a lousy season and spirits are rotten. The Batman theme warbles over loudspeakers while a lean figure in a black mask leaps across the field. Behind his shoulders billows a cape with “Army” stitched across it in heavy script. The daredevil is Cadet White, rallying schoolmates into frenzied cheers. Come winter’s end, the team is 8 and 2.

Sometimes that former cadet — now Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White — will talk of Vietnam or about the Army’s disorganization and despair following the war. But he favors a story of rebirth, when the war ended and a fiery spirit of renewal flourished among those swept up in the chore of rebuilding the Army. “With Desert Storm, Saddam found out just what a good job we had done in that transformation,” White said.

And like any true soldier, White will gladly tell why — after 11 years out of the Army — you can’t take the Army out of him. “It’s the people. I love the people,” he said.

Such kinship and conviction to the oath he made to Uncle Sam 34 years ago have lured the old soldier back home, back to the Pentagon’s halls and conference rooms, “to the greatest Army on earth,” he said.

“I am so absolutely proud to be your secretary, to be back with you, to be a part of the Army again,” the retired brigadier general told graduates of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy May 30 during his first call with soldiers as the Army’s 18th secretary. White’s visit was his way of telling noncommissioned officers that they matter to him, and to the Army.

An Old Soldier Returns



Eager to get on with the important matters — people — White inprocessed with the help of administrative assistant Joel B. Hudson while on a flight to Washington.

The secretary's attraction to the Army is inherited from two uncles, through whom White saw "the military side of things" during their careers in the National Guard. Knowingly dating himself, the 57-year-old spoke of "West Point Story," a popular '50s TV show and movie that lured him into the Army's officer ranks.

Commitment never panicked White, whose patriotic core has long been hooked to the desire to affect things that better America and nurture its people. "The fact that the Army and the armed forces are responsible for the security of the country, and therefore guarantee the special liberties that we enjoy, was always very appealing to me. I wanted to be a part of that."

White entered West Point from the streets of Detroit, Mich., at age 19. Craving captain's bars and the colonel's bird like any rookie cadet, White never imagined he'd wear general's stars and eventually emerge as the Army's senior civilian. But when duty calls, White answers.

The former cavalryman tells soldiers that he considers meeting their needs to be a sacred trust, and he knows what his followers want. "I raised a family under many of the same conditions as today's soldiers. I

have a kindred spirit with them in doing something about the conditions that our families live in," he said.

During the year he attended flight school, White's children and wife, Susan, moved five times. From Fort Leavenworth, Kan., to Germany, they nested in a variety of military homes, some barely tolerable, some comfortable. Their three children — Army brats Tom, Chuck and Katie — attended Department of Defense-run schools. And like today's career soldiers answering the nation's higher call, he raised a family on 23 years of military pay. "God knows we don't do

this for the money," he said.

White plunged into corporate America after serving as the executive assistant to former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Colin Powell, from 1989 to 1990. He returns to his Army roots from the office of the vice chairman of Enron Energy Services — a company that has been repeatedly rated by Fortune magazine as the most innovative company in America.

Though many will agree with Texas Sen. Phil Gramm's view that White is the kind of top hand who manages people and resources with instinctual finesse, White will say his desire to know and understand people is a blessing that binds him to the fiber of leadership.

"I've always thought that the bedrock characteristic of a good leader was that you had to like people," he said. "If you like people, you'll take the time to understand them. You'll engage them, and that's the only way to be an effective leader. For all of these years, one of my strengths is that I truly do like people."

With soldiers and families first, White promises his share of sweat in assuring readiness. Slick equipment and exact technology are obvious musts in the modernization race, he



said, but so are unit stability and operational tempo. Soldiers and commanders are right to demand time to train and time to be with their families and, in an era when America remains unscathed by war, it is up to White and his peers, he said, to settle the uncertainty of ambiguous threats, to outline national strategy in the finer terms that soldiers need to assure a sharp, skilled state.

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The secretary meets costumed members of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) after a recent Twilight Tattoo performance in Washington, D.C.

The secretary sees wisdom in Chief of Staff of the Army GEN Eric K. Shinseki's design to transform the service. White says change is everyday Army business, and that the urgency to change was titanic when the United States withdrew from Vietnam in 1973. Because the Army revamped and redefined its might then, today it drenches foreign armies in green envy.

"But there can be a tendency, when you're number one, to think that you can stay fat, dumb and happy for the foreseeable future," White said, his foot tapping the floor to punctuate his belief that tomorrow's Army will be irrelevant without transformation now. "Transformation is not optional. You have to get in it. And if you get in it, and if you commit yourself, it's going to be fun."

The secretary's closet exposes a preference for cheerful ties, but his prize hat is black. Rummaging through old photographs before his move to Washington, D.C., White shuffled to a worn image of himself as a platoon leader in Vietnam. "And what I had on my head in this picture is a black beret, because that's what we wore in the 11th Armored Cavalry

Four Objectives

SECRETARY of the Army Thomas E. White plans to pursue four objectives while working with the president and secretary of defense to make the Army's vision a reality.

◆ White's first objective is to invest in people. "We must attract, develop and retain America's best and brightest," he said at his May 10 confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

◆ Assuring readiness is his second objective. "Today, the pace of change is faster and conditions more uncertain than ever," he said. Assuring readiness means a modernization of equipment and weapons, integrating the active and reserve components, and managing the mission cycle of units to improve the operational and personnel tempo of people and systems.

◆ Transformation of the Army is White's third objective. That will require changes in doctrine, organization, training, leadership, equipment, recruiting, acquisition and infrastructure.

◆ White's final objective is to adopt sound business practices. "We owe it to every American to improve the manner in which we use our resources," he said. "And we owe it to every American to give our soldiers the capabilities they need to fight, win and live to fight again." —Beth Reece

Regiment in those days, and particularly in the Aerial Rifle Platoon."

White finds it sad that talk of tomorrow's Army has dwindled to chatter about a hat. But any soldier who has heard the secretary speak knows this month he'll join many of the living members of his Vietnam platoon at Fort Myer, Va., to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Black Horse Regiment.

"When all of us beat-up old guys



White learns about Fort Bliss, Texas, from the post commander, BG Stanley E. Green, as SMA Jack L. Tilley (second from left) and post CSM Mark C. Avery (third from left) look on.

The secretary tells soldiers he understands firsthand the quality-of-life needs of soldiers and their families. His wife, Susan, and three children lived in military housing throughout America and overseas.

tell our war stories and gather to share the camaraderie that only soldiers can share — and particularly soldiers who have shared a combat experience — we won't be wearing baseball caps." Nor will they wear dress caps or garrison caps. "We'll wear black berets — guaranteed."

White wants the new berets, branded a symbol of transformation by Shinseki, to be produced in U.S. textile factories. And why not make the hat a symbol of pride for all Americans? "We can erect brass plaques on the walls of these industries that will read: 'We make the berets for the finest Army in the world,'" White said.

A seasoned businessman, the secretary wants to initiate aggressive outsourcing into the civilian sector that will afford soldiers the quality of life they and their families deserve.

"If you look around the Army you'll see bits and pieces of it here and there ... privatization of family housing. What a tremendous idea!" He asks if building and running housing units are core competencies of the Army. "Of course not. So why don't we go get the major property develop-



"Taking care of soldiers and families is imperative and we will adjust the pace of transformation to accommodate what we need to do for soldiers and their families."

ers to compete for this business? Let them bring private capital to this thing" while soldiers get attractive facilities.

In the balance between people and transformation, the secretary's public statements have always put the soldier first.

"If we don't do the former — taking care of soldiers and families — then you can forget about the latter as far as I'm concerned," he said. Motivation and fun are hallmarks of the messages White delivers as he travels around installations. Soldiers laugh at his stories, and their ears perk up as he describes change, beckoning them to accept their roles as positive players.

Mentoring is the cardinal duty he anticipates from every leader. "Any successful NCO or officer has had a number of mentors along the way," White said, explaining that his leaders took time to appreciate him as a person, beyond the blanket description of "soldier."

"It allowed them to tailor their advice to me in a way that was relevant, and it also allowed them to predict where I would screw up," he said with a laugh. "They tried to limit the damage of my bad ideas and also open the doors for me to find other opportunities." Those mentors expect their invested time to pay off, White figures now, and "I will deliver."

Teetering "between middle and old age" — a point at which White said his sons believe he's no longer capable of serving as a bad example — White denies ever thinking he'd reach his current peak. "Heavens no. My aspiration was to command the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and I got that opportunity from '86 to '88."

A 1967 West Point yearbook leans on a high shelf in the Pentagon library. At the top left corner near the back is a picture of Tom White — his adolescent skin smooth, his smile politely subdued. It reads: "A wonderful future waits" for the man with a "golden voice, wild sense of humor and proven ability." □